

The Lawfulness of History

by Friedrich Schiller

The privilege which we enjoy of meeting here at this moment, possessing the present degree of national culture, with our present language, customs, political advantages, and liberty of conscience, is perhaps the result of all the previous events in the history of the world; at any rate, universal history would have to be taxed to account for this single circumstance. In order that we might meet here as Christians, this religion, whose advent had to be prepared by innumerable revolutions, had to issue from Judaism; it had to find the Roman empire precisely as it was found, which would enable Christianity to extend its victorious career over the world, and finally to ascend the throne of the Caesars. Our rude ancestors in the Thuringian forests had to succumb to the power of the Franks, who imposed their faith upon the former. By his growing riches, by the ignorance of the people, and by the weakness of their rulers, the clergy had to be favored in their attempts to abuse their authority, and to convert their silent power over the consciences into a political sword. Through a Gregory and Innocent the pontifical hierarchy had to empty all its horrors upon the human race, in order that an intrepid Augustinian monk might be induced, by the universal depravity and the crying scandal of spiritual despotism, to raise the standard of revolution, and to snatch one-half of Europe from the clutches of the pope. If we were to meet here as protestant Christians, the arms of our princes had to compel Charles V to sign a religious peace; a Gustavus Adolphus had to avenge the rupture of this compact, which had to be consolidated anew and for centuries by another

peace. Cities had to rise in Italy and Germany, had to open their gates to industry, break the chains of serfdom, snatch the judicial power out of the hands of ignorant tyrants, and cause themselves to be respected by a warlike hansa. If industry and trade were to flourish, if abundance was to invite the arts of peace and pleasure, if the state was to honor the useful husbandman, and if the basis of the permanent happiness of the world was to be laid by the creation of the beneficent middle class, the originator of our civilization, the German emperor had to become weakened by unceasing struggles with the popes, with their own vassals, with jealous neighbors; Europe had to bury its dangerous excess of population in the tombs of Asia, and the rebellious insolence of a feudal nobility had to be wiped out by the bloody conflicts of the club-law, by expeditions to the holy sepulchre and to Rome; if the chaotic confusion was to be cleared up, and the contending political powers were to rest in the blissful equilibrium of which our present leisure constitutes the reward. If our minds were to be freed from the ignorance in which they had been held captive by spiritual and political despotism, the germ of erudition that had been stifled for ages, must again break forth among her most furious antagonists, and an Al Mamun had to restore to science the loss which an Omar had inflicted upon it. The unspeakable wretchedness of barbarism had to drive our ancestors from the bloody judgments of God to human tribunals; devastating epidemics had to lead the erring healing art back again to the contemplation of natural laws; monkish idleness had to prepare a distant compensation for its evil results, and the profane industry of the cloister had to preserve the scattered debris of the Augustinian age until the art of printing should flash upon the world. Inspired by Grecian and Roman models, the debased spirit of northern

barbarians had again to ascend to higher and purer spheres, and erudition had to conclude an alliance with the muses and graces, if it was to find an avenue to the human heart, and deserve the name of a civilizer of the human race. Would Greece have given birth to a Thucydides, to a Plato, an Aristotle; would Rome have produced a Horace, a Cicero, a Virgil, a Livius, if these two states had not reached the height of political power to which they really ascended? In one world, if their whole history had not previously taken place? How many inventions, discoveries, political and ecclesiastical revolutions had to coincide, in order that the spread of these new and delicate germs of science and art might be secured? How many wars had to be waged, how many alliances had to be concluded, torn asunder, and re-concluded, in order that the principle of peace might become the leading political maxim of Europe, which alone enables citizens as well as states to watch over their best interests, and to unite their energies for the accomplishment of noble ends.

Even in the daily business of life we cannot avoid becoming the debtors of past centuries; the most unequal periods in the life of humanity are found to contribute to our culture, as the most distant continents contribute to our refinement. The clothes that we are wearing, the condiments with which we season our food, the gold that we pay for them, a number of our most active remedial agents, which may likewise be used as so many means of destruction—do they not remind us of a Columbus who discovered America, of a Vasco da Gama who sailed around the southern point of the African continent?

We see then that a long chain of events can be traced from the present moment to the commencement of the human race, which seem to bear upon each other as cause and effect. Only the Infinite Spirit can survey it wholly and completely; man moves within narrower limits.

I. Many of these events have not occurred in the presence of witnesses or have not been recorded by permanent signs. Among these events we have to number all those that occurred previous to the existence of the human race, or to the invention of signs. The source of all history is tradition, and the organ of tradition is speech. The whole epoch preceding the use of speech, however pregnant it may have been to the world, is lost to universal history.

II. Even after speech had been discovered, and it had become possible to express and communicate to others the things which had taken place, yet these communications were carried on in the beginning by means of the uncertain and changeable channel of tradition. From mouth to mouth such events were perpetuated through a long line of generations, a system of recording events which must necessarily partake of the changes that affected the transmitting agents. Oral traditions constitute an exceedingly uncertain channel for historical events; hence such as happened previous to the introduction of written signs, are, so to say, lost to universal history.

III. Written records are not imperishable; innumerable monuments of antiquity have been destroyed by age and accidents; but few ancient remnants have been preserved until the period when the art of printing was invented. Most of them have perished, and with

them we have lost the light that they would have shed upon historical events.

IV. Most of the records that have been preserved have been disfigured and rendered unintelligible by passion, imperfect comprehension, and even by the genius of their expounders. Even the most ancient historical record excites our suspicion, nor does a modern chronicle convey certainty to the mind. If an event which took place this very day, among people with whom we are living, and in a city which we are inhabiting, is related in so many different ways, that we find it difficult to extract the truth from the many contradictory statements; how can we expect to have a correct knowledge of nations and ages that are removed from us much further by the strangeness of their customs than by age? The small sum of events which remains after making all the previously-named deductions, constitutes the subject of history in its vastest acceptation. What and how much of this belongs to universal history?

The Method of Universal History

Among these events the general historian distinguishes such as have had an essential, incontrovertible, and readily perceptible influence upon the present constitution of the world, and the condition of living generations. In order to gather materials for universal history, we have to regard the relation between the historical fact and the present order of things. Universal history starts from a beginning which is the exact opposite of the beginning of the world. Actually, events descend from the commencement of things to their most recent developments; the general historian starts from

the most recent changes of society, tracing events backward to the first beginning of history. If he ascends mentally from the present year and century to the next preceding, noting among the events of the latter period those that shed light upon the events of the next following; if he continues this course step by step, to the beginning—not of the world, for no guide leads thus far—but of monumental records: he may then turn back by the same road, and, guided by the facts he has noted, descend readily and without impediment from the commencement of monumental records to the most recent period. This is the universal history we possess, and it is that which will be expounded to you.

Since universal history is dependent upon the abundance or paucity of sources, there must exist as many gaps in universal history as there are blanks in the series of traditions. Howsoever uniformly, necessarily, and precisely, social and political changes succeed each other as cause and effect, yet historically the chain of events will be found interrupted, and arbitrarily or accidentally united. Between the course of the world and the course of universal history there exists a marked disagreement. The world's course may be compared to an uninterrupted stream of which only a few ripples are shown in the mirror of universal history. Inasmuch as the connection between a distant event and the events of the current year may become strikingly manifest before its connection with previous or cotemporaneous events is seen: it inevitably follows that events which are intimately connected with the latest epoch will sometimes appear isolated in the age to which they properly speaking belong. The origin of Christianity and especially of Christian ethics is an event of this kind. Christianity is so deeply interested in the present condition of the world, that no

fact in universal history claims a greater portion of our regard than the origin of that institution; but this origin cannot be satisfactorily accounted for either by the age in which, or by the people among whom it took place. The data for such an explanation are wanting.

With all these defects before us, universal history would only remain an aggregation of fragments which could never be dignified with the name of science. Here it is that the philosophical reason supplies the deficiencies, and by uniting these fragments by means of artificial links, the aggregation of facts is systematized, and changed to a rational, coherent whole. Authority for this proceeding is derived from the uniformity and immutable oneness of the laws of nature and of the human mind, in consequence of which oneness the events of the remotest antiquity recur in our age, if similar circumstances act as determining causes; by which means we are enabled to obtain light and draw inferences from the most recent events occurring within the range of our own observation, regarding those that took place in the primeval ages. In history, as in other departments of science, the method of reasoning by analogy is a powerful auxiliary; but it should be justified by an appropriate object, and resorted to with caution and judgment.

Scarcely has the philosophical observer commenced to dwell upon the materials of universal history, when a new impulse becomes active in his mind, which leads him irresistibly to trace events to a general law of development, and to determine the idea from which they flow as their generating principle. The more frequently and successfully he renews the attempt of uniting the past with the present, the more he will be disposed to unite in the relation of

means to end what has manifested itself to his mind as cause and effect. One phenomenon after another ceases to stand before him as the product of blind chance, of lawless anarchy, and becomes an harmonious element in a concordant whole, of which he, it is true, only possesses an intellectual perception. Very soon he finds it difficult to persuade himself that this succession of phenomena which, to his mind, seems so full of regularity and design, does not possess these qualities in reality; he finds it difficult to resign under the blind rule of necessity what had begun to assume such a luminous shape under the borrowed light of the understanding. Out of his own reason he transfers this harmony into the order of things; in other words, he arranges the cause of things under a rational end, he introduces a teleological principle into universal history. In company with this principle he again wanders through the labyrinth of history, examining in its mirror every phenomenon which the great stage presents to his mind. He sees the same phenomenon confirmed by a thousand facts, and refuted by as many more; but as long as important links remain wanting in the series of the world's changes; as long as destiny keeps back the ultimate explanation of so many events, he declares the question as undecided, and the victory is awarded to the opinion that offers more satisfaction to the understanding, and a higher degree of happiness to the heart.

I need hardly make the statement that a universal history written in this spirit, can only be achieved in the latest periods of the world's existence. A premature application of this great measure might tempt the historian to do violence to events, and, by attempting to accelerate this happy epoch for universal history, to remove it more and more. But we cannot direct too soon our attention to

this luminous, and yet so much neglected aspect of history, by which it connects itself with the highest subjects of human endeavors. Even the silent contemplation of this, as yet only possible end, must be a stimulating incentive and a sweet reward to the industry of the inquirer. He will attach importance to the slightest exertion, if he finds himself upon the road or leads his successors to the road upon which the solution of the world's problem may be reached, and where the Supreme Mind may be met in the beautiful order of his government.

The Immortal Citizen Of All Ages And Nations

Treated in this manner, the study of universal history will afford you an occupation as attractive as useful. It will kindle a light in your understandings, and a beneficent enthusiasm in your hearts. It will elevate you above all petty views of common morality, and, by spreading out before your vision the great picture of ages and nations, it will rectify the premature decisions of the moment, and the contracted verdicts of egotism. By accustoming man to identify himself with the past, and to embrace the distant future in his conclusions, it hides the extreme points of birth and death which confine man's life within such narrow and oppressive limits, and, like an optical illusion, it expands his short existence into an infinite space, and imperceptibly merges the individual in the species.

Man changes and quits the stage; his opinions pass away and change with him; history alone remains upon the stage, as the immortal citizen of all nations and ages. Like Homer's Zeus, it regards with the same cheerful eye the bloody labors of war and the peaceful tribes that derive their guiltless support from the milk

of their flocks. However lawlessly man's freedom may seem to dash along on its course, history looks calmly upon the chaotic movement; her far-reaching eye beholds in the distant future the rule by which this anarchical chaos is bent toward a higher system of order. What she hides from the rebellious conscience of a Gregory, or a Cromwell, she hastens to reveal to humanity: "that a selfish man may pursue low aims, but unconsciously promotes those of a higher order."

No false glitter can dazzle her, no ruling prejudice can carry her away, for she witnesses the ultimate fate of things. Whatever ceases, has been of equally short duration for her; she preserves the freshness of the well-earned wreath of olives, and breaks the obelisk erected by vanity. By showing the workings of the delicate mechanism by which the quiet hand of Nature has developed man's powers from the commencement of the world, according to an immutable design, and by indicating the progressive evolutions of this great design in every age, she restores the true measure of happiness and merit which the ruling delusion falsifies differently in every century. She cures us of the extravagant admiration of antiquity, and of the childish longing for the past; and by pointing out to us our own acquirements, she prevents us from wishing back again the age of Alexander or Augustus.

All the preceding ages have unconsciously and unintentionally endeavored to prepare the advent of our humane century. Ours are the treasures which industry and genius, reason and experience, have conquered in the world's protracted existence. History teaches us the value of goods which habit and unassailed possession incline so readily to rob of our gratitude; precious goods, stained

with the blood of the noblest of our race, and conquered by the severe labor of generations. Who among you, in whom a clear mind and a feeling heart are allied, could think of the obligation of gratitude without experiencing a silent wish to discharge to the coming generation the debt which the past can no longer receive? A noble desire must become kindled in our hearts to contribute with our own means to the rich legacy of truth, morality, and liberty, that has been bequeathed to us by our ancestors, and which we have to leave again to our successors; and to link our fleeting existence with the imperishable chain that winds through all the generations of mankind. Whatever may be the destiny that awaits you in human society, you all can contribute something to that legacy! For every merit the road to immortality is open, to that true immortality where the deed lives and is perpetuated to future generations, though the name of its author should remain buried in the urn of time!